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ABSTRACT

Even though the economy is recovering, recession and restructuring have permanently changed the way successful job searchers approach the task of finding employment. Many individuals who have been successful in their job search have adjusted the process to accommodate the recent recession and the continuing restructuring. Informal, external methods have taken on added importance as strategies for locating jobs. Those college students who have had positive job search outcomes used many of these strategies: they started early; they acquired job experience through internships and cooperative education; instead of waiting for employers to come to campus, they went directly to them; they made hunting for a job a full-time job; and they made use of all networks and connections. White-collar managers and employees who have successfully reentered the job market have often used these strategies: they approached their job search as if it were a full-time job; to tap into the hidden or unpublished job market, they made extensive use of their networks; they also used formal methods; and they turned to temporary or part-time work. The following conclusions are based on commonalities between contemporary job search strategies for new college graduates and for laid-off, white-collar workers: work experience pays off; finding a job must be thought of as a job; networking is essential; and use of information technology is the "wave of the future." (Contains 15 references.) (YLB)

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Job Search Skills for the Current Economy

by Susan Imel

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Despite the fact that the United States is creating about 2 million new jobs per year, unemployment and underemployment continue to be a way of life for many individuals (Church 1993). Particularly at risk are middle managers and college graduates. Since 1988, 19 percent of the layoffs have been from the ranks of those classified as middle managers, more than any other group, and Fortune 500 companies continue to announce cutbacks. The Department of Labor projects that between now and 2005, nearly 30 percent of college graduates will be under- or unemployed, compared to 19.9 percent in 1990 (Topolnicki 1993). These changing economic conditions have altered conventional practices for finding a job. Both new college graduates and seasoned workers are discovering that traditional job search methods can no longer be counted on to result in satisfactory employment. This *ERIC Digest* provides information about effective, contemporary job search strategies through a discussion of the current context, general information about the job search process, and strategies for those job seekers most at risk.

The Current Context

The most recent recession that began in July 1990 and ended officially in March 1991 was mild compared to previous recessions, but it harshly affected the U.S. work force. Not only did the labor market continue to deteriorate long after the recession officially ended, but also white-collar workers were more at risk of losing their jobs in the early 1990s than at any time in the past (Gardner 1994). Several recent events indicate that the labor market is recovering from the 1990-1991 recession:

- In 1993, the economy created more jobs than it eliminated, with most in managerial, professional, and technical occupations, and the unemployment rate fell from 7.3 percent to 6.4 percent (Topolnicki 1994).
- Eighty percent of those college graduates who look for employment are finding work within 6 months, and 75 percent consider their jobs genuine beginnings of a career ladder (Smith 1994).
- According to one outplacement firm, job searches for its laid-off midlevel executive clients averaged 3.8 months in 1993 versus 6 months in 1991 and 1992 (Caminiti 1994).

Even though the economy is recovering, recession and restructuring have permanently changed the way successful job searchers approach the task of finding employment (Farnham 1993). Many individuals who have been successful in their job search adjusted the process to accommodate the recent recession and the continuing restructuring.

The Job Search Process

An information-gathering process that involves both internal and external exploration, the job search can be adapted to the current context. Internal exploration focuses on an individual's personal traits whereas external exploration involves obtaining job-related information from friends, family, employment agencies, and other sources (Silliker 1993). External exploration, which is composed of formal and informal methods, has been most affected by the changing economy. Examples of formal external search methods include responding to advertisements and using public and private employment services. Informal methods include using family, friends, and acquaintances as contacts and sources of information (Carson 1989).

Another way of analyzing the job search process is by thinking about the job market in two broad categories: the open market and the hidden or unpublished market. The open market consists of employment agencies, temporary firms, and advertisements. The hidden market consists of those job leads and openings that must be ferreted out through personal contacts and networking. Although both markets contain jobs, most jobs are in the hidden or unpublished market that is accessed primarily through informal strategies (Weinstein 1993). Thus, informal, external methods take on added importance as strategies for locating jobs.

Strategies for New College Graduates

Those college graduates who had positive job search outcomes used many of the following strategies (Farnham 1993; Martin 1993; Richman 1994; Smith 1994; Vinton 1992; Williams and Gajalla 1993):

- **They started early**. Freshman year is not too early to begin thinking about employment following graduation. Part of an early start includes participating in extracurricular activities as a demonstration of leadership. An early start can demonstrate planning ability.
- **They acquired job experience** through internships and cooperative education. "Internships are becoming more and more important. That's when students learn the soft skills of working in a corporate environment" (Martin 1993, p. 14). Not only does work experience stand out, many companies are making full-time offers only to those graduates who have served internships. For example, General Mills, which has been offering one-third of its job openings to those college graduates who served as interns, plans to increase that number to between 40 and 50 percent (Farnham 1993).
- Instead of waiting for employers to come to campus, **they went directly to them**. Small and medium-sized companies are where most graduates will find work but most do not have the resources for campus recruiting. Like large companies, these employers are looking for "team players with strong work records" but they are less choosy (Smith 1994, p. 60).
- **They made hunting a job a full-time job**. They were serious about devoting time and work to all the steps involved in a successful job search.
- **They made use of all networks and connections**. In addition to talking to family, friends, and acquaintances, they

expanded their professional networks by reading trade magazines, joining professional associations, and attending conferences.

According to Farnham (1993), "Jobs [for new college graduates] are out there—and good ones. But to get them, students are having to look earlier, work harder, work smarter, and sometimes venture off the beaten path" (p. 60). Not all students are heeding this advice. A study of communication majors found that, although students had the right ideas to support their search during difficult economic times (e.g., a willingness to accept a lower starting salary and to relocate), nearly 70 percent of the respondents had not visited their college career center (Williams and Gajalla 1993).

Strategies for Dislocated White-Collar Workers

Although for every $10,000 they earn they will average about the equivalent of 1 month of job hunting, most laid-off managers or professionals can expect to find a comparable new position (Topolnicki 1994). White-collar managers and employees who successfully reentered the job market often used the following strategies (Caminiti 1994; Topolnicki 1994; Weinstein 1993):

- **They approached their job search as if it were a full-time job**, establishing regular procedures and routines that ensured they would spend adequate time on their job search.
- To tap into the hidden or unpublished job market, **they made extensive use of their networks.** Rather than concealing their job loss, they made use of all contacts, talking to anyone who might give them a lead. Many expanded their networks by joining support groups designed to assist with the job search. "[The] great thing about networking is that it allows you to find out about opportunities within a company before they ever surface anywhere else . . . do you know what a tremendous edge that gives you?" (Caminiti 1994, p. 10).
- **They also used formal methods** such as executive recruiting firms and responding to advertisements to access the open market. Even though fewer than 10 percent of job seekers find jobs through want ads, they checked trade publications and put extra effort into their written replies. A surprising number of displaced managers and professionals—20 percent—found work through executive recruiting firms (Topolnicki 1994).
- **They turned to temporary or part-time work.** This strategy not only allowed them to keep up in their fields but it also allowed them to tap into another networking system and prove themselves with a company. Increasingly, companies are using temporary positions as a way to "try out" prospective employees.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are based on the commonalities between contemporary job search strategies for new college graduates and for laid-off, white-collar workers.

- Work experience pays off. Work experience with a prospective employer through internships is becoming more critical for college students. Using temporary or part-time work as an entre to full-time work is also emerging as a strategy for laid-off workers.
- Finding a job must be thought of as a job. Such a perspective ensures that time and energy will be devoted to the job search.
- Networking is essential. Silliker (1993) recommends that job seekers need to be trained and encouraged to use their networks, suggesting that early career planning and career education should include a specific social networking competency.
- Use of information technology is the "wave of the future." Although recommended as a strategy for both groups (Smith 1994; Topolnicki 1994), it is not yet clear how widely used it is. Kennedy and Morrow (1994) describe how information technology is changing the way people look for jobs. With the expansion of the Internet and other electronic networking services, it is clear that in the future successful job seekers will make full use of these resources.

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